

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH LIEUTENANT COLONEL RICHARD HALL,  
TASK FORCE 2D BATTALION, 7TH MARINE REGIMENT, 1ST MARINE DIVISION VIA  
TELECONFERENCE FROM AFGHANISTAN TIME: 9:27 A.M. EDT DATE: FRIDAY, JUNE 27, 2008

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LT. COL. HALL: Hi. This is Lieutenant Colonel Hall.

LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG (New Media Directorate, OASD PA): Yes.  
Hello, sir. And I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense  
Bloggers Roundtable for Friday, June 27. My name is Lieutenant Jennifer Cragg  
with the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, and I will be  
moderating our call today.

A note to the bloggers on the line. Please remember to clearly state  
your name and blogger organization in advance of your question.

So with that, today, as everyone knows, our guest is Lieutenant Colonel  
Richard Hall, Task Force 2 Delta Battalion, 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division.  
Lieutenant Col. Hall is here today to provide an operational update on the  
2/7's mission in Afghanistan. So, sir, with that, I will turn it over to you  
for any opening remarks.

LT. COL. HALL: Okay, it sounded like somebody else just joined us. I  
appreciate the opportunity to talk about 2/7. Basically, as was stated, you  
know, we are a task force based on an infantry battalion that has been  
reinforced and trained to do a police training and mentoring mission, which we  
believe is probably the future for stabilization and expansion of the government  
of Afghanistan.

What we're currently experiencing right now is a lot of change, and it's  
good change.

The focused district development is continuing on track as well as the  
in-district reform. What that means is we have a couple districts that are  
going through the transfusion of previously untrained police, sending them to a  
six- or eight-week training package and then reinserting them back into their  
district as trained and mentored police. We have several of our districts that  
are well under way. We have almost 300 police that are currently undergoing  
training right now and we have another district that's about to receive its  
first group of trained police back into the district and to swap out with the  
place-holders there.

So in a lot of 2/7's districts, we have some positive things going on  
where previously they had relatively well-trained police but not mentored and

certainly under the influence of corruption now about to be replaced with trained and respectable police. So the Marine mission as well as the people of Afghanistan are both motivated by this recent change in our situation.

So with that, I'll open it up to your questions.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir. And who joined us the last minute?

Q This is Troy Steward with Bouhammer.com.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, Troy. You're number four on the list.

So the first person on the call was Spencer. Spencer, you want to go ahead with your questions?

Q Sure. Thanks very much for joining us, Colonel Hall. This is Spencer Ackerman with The Washington Independent. We've been reading a lot about increased instability and violence, particularly in Helmand province, where I believe you are. Can you talk a little bit about that and how the police training mission is going to cut against that recent development?

LT. COL. HALL: Okay. As is somewhat normal for this blogger, the connections coming in -- are coming in pretty poor. But I think your question is, is that there's been an increase in violence and how is that affecting our police training. Was that your question? Q Yes, sir. And how do you --

LT. COL. HALL: Okay.

Q Yeah.

LT. COL. HALL: The -- go ahead.

Q No, go ahead, sir.

LT. COL. HALL: All right. The increase in violence really is tied primarily to our operations, so it's not that the Taliban is so much increasing their level of activity as much as it is us that is interdicting and disrupting their operation, thereby creating the events that you're reading about and seeing more of.

So as we get more -- as we get out in the street more and we're becoming much more active, we learn the environment, we are disrupting their activities, which puts them in the deep end. So that's -- part, that it's not their increase in activities, it's based on our increase in activities that's causing what you're seeing as increased violence.

The second part of that is, is how is it affecting our training mission? Well, it's actually enabling and enhancing our training mission because as we go out there, we are showing the police these -- whatever stage of development they're in, whether they've been trained and mentored for some time or they've just recently returned to their district, we are showing them that we are standing shoulder to shoulder with them. That has given them a lot of confidence.

Furthermore, as they are experiencing the activities that we are, they're learning by watching us and working alongside us. So not only are they gaining in, you know, credibility, (proficiency ?), but also in confidence. So

the training mission is improving, given the increase in our activity. And I hope that answers your question.

Q Thank you, sir.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, Spencer, do you have any other questions?

Q No, I'm good.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Let's go to number two. Christian, go ahead, please.

Q Yes. Hi, Lieutenant Colonel Hall, this is Christian Lowe with military.com. And I'm going to ask you a difficult question here, and I apologize up front. But one of the things I've noticed, and my count could be wrong, but one of the things I've noticed is within the last month or month and a half, your unit has lost a lot of guys. I think by my count, there's nine, including one corpsman. And I understand that you're pushing out there more aggressively, but is there anything else to which you can attribute that spike in casualties? And is there anything you're doing to try and mitigate that?

LT. COL. HALL: That's actually a good question, that I try to answer to the families back home as well. And the first part is that we expected that we were going to experience a lot of friction by the enemy. They have had absolute freedom of movement, freedom of action until our arrival. We are hurting their economy by -- their corruption, whether it's the drug traffic or whether it's just simply doing illegal things by graft or illegal taxation or whatever the case might be. We're disrupting that and they don't like it, so they've been trying to come after us because of that.

The other piece of that is that because we are more active, we are out there, we are exposing ourself to higher risk. And consequently, we've had a lot of unfortunate and tragic events that did happen. The IED threat is primarily the biggest culprit.

The -- and let me just correct you on the count. It's 10. And the reason why it's 10 and not nine is because I do count my interpreters as one of my men.

Although they're Afghans, they're still my people, so I feel the same about them since we work side by side and we are here for them.

Q Yeah.

LT. COL. HALL: The IED threat, again, is the biggest threat that we face here. So we're not being beaten by the Taliban per se, we're being beaten by an explosion. So it's not their prowess that is beating us, it's the technique that they're using.

So, what are we doing about it? Quite a bit. We have learned a lot of the tactics and techniques that they're employing, and we've already adjusted a lot on that. We've also increased our training, and we are getting more and better equipment that is able to counter those type of things.

Even with all those safeguards, even with all that additional training, we can't eliminate the risk. Because there are no roads here -- well, actually there's only one road, and that's the Ring Road, that is paved. Almost

everywhere else we go in the 28,000-plus square kilometers that we operate, it's over (open ?) desert or through wadis or washes. And because of that, the enemy can bury IEDs in that type of terrain better than you can in blacktop road. So that's another initiative that we're trying to aggressively work, is to try to get the roads blacktopped so they can't emplace IEDs.

And so, given that, we're mitigating the threat by using alternate means of movement, and when we do move, we're doing it in a much smarter way and with better equipment.

Does that answer your question?

Q It does, but I have a follow-up, if I may. Do you have in your inventory or have you requested or would you like any MRAP vehicles?

LT. COL. HALL: We do have MRAP vehicles, and that is one of the things that we are getting even more of. And I can't really get into the detail of how we operate and the quantities and so forth, because that would give the enemy, if they found out, you know, some of the way we operate and how we mitigate their techniques. But absolutely, we do have MRAPs, and we're even getting more MRAPs, as well as some other equipment that will further protect the force and reduce the risk that we're exposed to. Q Okay. Thanks. And one more follow-up. I'm sorry. I know there's only like three of us on here so maybe I can grab a bigger chunk of your time, but just for the benefit, for all of us, for the record, can you tell us about where you are -- like what the terrain is like, what the people are like, the enemy that you're primarily encountering? You sound like -- earlier on you said you're disrupting their economy. It sounds like you're in an opium-rich area. Can you just sort of give us a scene-setter of what your battlespace looks like?

LT. COL. HALL: Yes, I can. We are across two regions, two provinces, and we're actually located in sometimes up to 11 different districts. So when you look at our battlespace, which is about 250 miles by 150 miles, it's about the size of Vermont. We got a lot of terrain to move across.

As I mentioned before, there are no roads. So a lot of that travel is over open desert or through very, very rough terrain. It's literally four-wheeling practically all the time, which has a lot of wear and tear on the vehicles, but it also puts us at risk, because the enemy's able to implant IEDs in that type of terrain whereas they cannot on a paved road -- or at least -- (audio interference).

We're in Helmand province as well as Farah province and we cohabitate with the ANP within eight primary districts. And so we are living and working and operating side-by-side with the Afghan people. Now, the people themselves -- and I like the fact that you asked that question, because we like the Afghan people and they genuinely like us. So there's a very positive relationship that -- (inaudible word) -- continue to strive and work for their prosperity and their security, because not only are they genuinely friendly, they support us, they like us being here and they're extremely grateful that we're here. And I'm asked that all the time, why would we bother.

And so not only do they appreciate the fact that we're here, but they're willing to do something about it. So I'll give you one example. In one particular district, we went to respond to a call of a group of Taliban that were harassing one of the villages. So we conducted an operation to go in there to check it out. The enemy found out we were coming and left, and the people

there told us that prior to our coming that they had pulled out and basically afraid of us.

When we left, the Taliban came back into the village. And while the village knew then that we were there to protect them and that all they had to do was call us and we'd be there to support them, they took up arms themselves and repelled the Taliban and said that you are not coming into our village.

And they literally got into a firefight and prevented that Taliban from reoccupying that village, just to give you an idea and a flavor for how far these people are willing to go, for the sake of themselves, and then not just rely totally upon us. So that really motivates us, because we see direct, positive results of our activities and our influence.

And as far as the Taliban goes, you hit the nail on the head. And I think that people are really getting to understand that the Taliban are not religiously idealistic. They're not pushing for Islam. They are fighting for the opium trade and for corruption. And the people are starting to understand that.

So whether they like it or not, the Taliban are ostracizing themselves, separating themselves from the people, because they are indiscriminately killing innocents. And they've shown that multiple times, with their suicide bombing right in the midst of civilian population at a tremendous toll to civilians, not just our Marines.

Q Okay. Thanks a lot.

LT. CRAGG: We actually have two other callers on the line, a Christopher and a Troy.

Christopher, you were number three. So do you want to go ahead with your questions?

Q Good morning. This is Christopher Radin with the Long War Journal.

Are you involved with training of the Afghan border police and operating with them?

LT. COL. HALL: No, we are not.

We train primarily just the ANP, not the border police -- (audio break). And we don't train the ANA either. There's other teams that do that specifically.

We are tasked, organized and equipped to train the police. We have National Guardsmen, who are great Americans by the way, who come to us with police background, law enforcement background.

We also have DynCorp which are also -- they also have law enforcement expertise. And so they're teaming up with us to provide a very professional cadre of folks, that can properly train not only the paramilitary skills that we teach them but really the law enforcement piece of serving and protecting and doing the right thing when no one's looking.

Q So a different note, I guess, you guys are leaving in about four months or so. What are your sort of metrics of success? What do you -- in the end of your tour, what would you like to see that tells you that it's been a successful -- you've had a successful time there in what you've accomplished?

LT. COL. HALL: The way we're looking at it is, I use an often-used phrase, is we have to teach -- (audio break). And what we're looking to do is to train -- whatever state they're in, whatever level of expertise or proficiency they're at now, we need to raise them to a level where they believe that they're competent and confident in their ability to maintain security and control of their specific districts; also give them the character development through mentoring that will allow them to be respectable, even when no one's looking.

But we also have the piece that is not very specific to our mission but is very much tied to our mission, and that is the integration with the locals. We have to get the local people to accept this newly trained and mentored police to be the law enforcement representative, the extension of government in their district. And the single way that's going to happen is through proof in action.

By our leading the formations and working with them, we slowly pull back the reins and let them do more and more. So we know that by our presence and by our actions, the public will see what it's rightly supposed to look like. And then when we start turning it over to the ANP, they're going to have that same expectation.

The promising note to this is even in the recruit training that we've watched these guys, they are already starting to police themselves, and yet they've only had one week of training. And now at this point they're in the third week of training, and even more so they're policing themselves. And they haven't even graduated yet.

So we have hope and we have promise, but what we really need to see is when we pull back and we allow them to do everything on their own that they continue to act and respond in the same manner that we would. And we critique them. It's standards-based. So we have metrics assigned to their actions. We test them. And ultimately, when we leave, the hope is that that will continue without our presence.

Q Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, Troy, do you have any questions?

LT. COL. HALL: Welcome.

Q Yes. Hey, sir, how are you doing? Troy Steward from Bouhammer.com. I'm kind of curious -- we talked a while back, right when you first got on the ground, before your Marines really got out there -- kind of how it's shaping up between the -- what, probably -- some of your Marines that were around when you were in Iraq doing the same type of things in the Anbar province, what they are seeing as far as similarities and differences from training and working with the Iraqi police to working with the Afghan police now.

LT. COL. HALL: I think the general consensus of the Marines right now is that it's much easier to work with the Afghans than it ever was with the

Iraqis. They really take ownership of their activities, their actions and their behavior.

I am not suggesting for a minute that there's not still a lot of corruption that needs to be overcome. And I don't think we're going to eliminate the corruption problem while we're here. I know for a fact that we will mitigate that and reduce it significantly. And we've already seen that because of the placement and the changes in the leadership and their attitude toward corruption, so much so that they've actually put their lives on the line and put themselves at risk. And they didn't have to, but in order to stand firm on principles and that -- as well as trying to be an honorable, respectable police officer.

Now, the Afghans, as they're being trained, they're watching us. We have very similar type mentality. And basically, they're trying to become just like us. And we're getting this symbiotic relationship going right now, where they're standing toe-to-toe with us in firefights.

And when they see us standing there with them in their country, that just bolsters their confidence and even gives us a lot more credibility and respect, so they even strive more to become like us.

Q Right, sir. Thank you. Okay.

One follow-up question. Since the famed Kandahar prison break, have you seen -- has your op tempo picked up much? Has it shifted any amount of your focus to help police those guys up, if possible, or anything along that -- I mean, I guess has it impacted your battalion's mission at all?

LT. COL. HALL: We certainly thought that we would see a spike right away. It hasn't happened. Furthermore, the ANA has captured or killed quite a significant number of them already, so they started to lay low right away or -- (inaudible). So I think it's going to be a while before we'll see any residual effect of their escape and movement out west into the Helmand and Farah provinces. But so far, we have not seen impact or effect on that.

Q Okay, thank you, sir. That's all I got.

LT. COL. HALL: You're welcome.

LT. CRAGG: Does anybody else have any questions?

Q I do have a follow-up again.

LT. CRAGG: Please go ahead.

Q Lieutenant Colonel Hall, this is Christian Lowe again, with military.com. A small question here. But we've heard a lot of complaints from commanders in the field about a lack of air support, and particularly in helicopter air support. What's your -- how do you view that? You know, what about all the supporting elements that you depend upon from, you know, the NATO forces over there? Is there enough? Could you use more? And what could you use more of?

LT. COL. HALL: Nobody wants to be a tattletale, but I tell you that you hit the nail right on the head, and I won't have any reservations in echoing that concern that we lack air over here. And we have -- our whole chain of

command is aware of it. By the way, our chains of command, both through the CSTC-A or the Marine chain, has been incredibly supportive of us and pretty much give us whatever we ask for and what we need, if it's available. The problem is, is aviation assets are scarce. And if they can get it to us, they will. In fact, they are working on that very thing as we speak. We even have the deputy commander -- or commanding general of (MARCENT ?) here with us today to personally work on the things that we're asking for.

So he came over here to do a personal assessment of what we want, what we need, and how the area of operation is shaping up.

So we're getting lots of attention on that subject matter. Certainly you hit the nail on the head which is, we need rotary wing assets in order to enable us to do a lot more than we currently are. And really that is, is because we have such a large battlespace. It just takes a lot of time to do everything by ground.

Q Could you use some Ospreys?

LT. COL. HALL: I don't think that would -- any type of aviation asset, I think, could be used over here for our battalion. I can't speak for the MEU. I'm sure they could use it. But for 2/7, I think it would be difficult to use them over here at least right now.

And quite frankly I'm not sure of all the capabilities and limitations of the Ospreys, as far as landing zone requirements and so forth. But most things are relatively tight. Certainly the CH-53, 46 or some of our ally nations' rotary wings can land in some of these smaller LZs.

I just don't know enough about the Ospreys to be able to say that, you know, we could use them here. But I'm guessing, because it's a larger platform, it might have a little more difficulty getting into some of these small places.

Q Okay. Thanks a lot for your help.

LT. CRAGG: With that, does anybody have any last-minute questions?

Q Yeah, just one real quick thing.

LT. CRAGG: Okay.

Q Colonel, what was the other province you said you were operating in besides Helmand? I missed it on the call?

LT. COL. HALL: Although we initially started out in Kandahar, we have moved west into Helmand and Farah provinces.

Q Thank you. LT. CRAGG: Just to make sure, can you spell the last province, sir? Sir?

LT. COL. HALL: I think we might have lost the connection here. Anybody still there?

LT. CRAGG: Yes. Yeah, everyone's still here. Can you still hear me, sir?

Lieutenant Colonel Hall, can you still hear me? Everyone, can --



LT. COL. HALL: I can hear you now, yeah.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, good. Can you spell that last province for the Fed News, just to make sure we have it spelled right?

LT. COL. HALL: That's Farah, F-A-R-A-H.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you. That's how I thought it was.

Well, with that, thank you all. We had some --

LT. COL. HALL: You're welcome.

LT. CRAGG: I'm sorry, did someone say something? (Pause.) Okay.

Thank you all. We had some great questions and comments today. As we wrap up today's call, Lieutenant Colonel, do you want to provide any final comments?

LT. COL. HALL: I do. I would like to just say that, you know, we have some of the very best of America serving over here, and I would ask that you continue to provide your prayers and your support to the guys over here. Their heart is absolutely unbelievable. When I have gone to the hospital to visit some of the wounded with the intent of cheering them up, bolstering their confidence, the exact opposite occurred. Their spirit was so great that I had shivers going through me after talking to these men. Their primary concern was, you know, how are the guys doing that are still out there, and when can I get back? And to see these guys with that kind of heart is absolutely amazing.

And, you know, I guess the final thing I would say is you can't possibly sum up the lives of these men -- the sacrifices they've made or the anguishes of their families, or even the losses that we feel -- in just mere words. So I guess I'll just leave it at that and say that, you know, continue providing prayers and support to us over here, but I can tell you, these are some great Americans.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir. That was a great comment. And I wish you everything the best, and please be safe. And thank you for making time -- I know you're very busy -- for all the bloggers today. You had some great comments. Today's program will be available online at the Blogger's link on dod.mil, where you'll be able to access a story based on today's call, along with source documents such as Lieutenant Colonel Hall's bio, the audio file, and print transcripts.

Again, thank you, sir, very much, for speaking with us and the blogger participants.

This concludes today's event. And feel free to disconnect.

LT. COL. HALL: Thank you. It was my privilege.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir.

Q Thanks, Colonel. Thanks, everyone.

LT. COL. HALL: Thank you.

All right, thank you. Take care.

END.